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Race for NJ state legislature heats up during final weeks

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By **Aleksi Tzatzev** / Associate News Editor | 0 comments

All N.J. state legislators are up for re-election this Nov. 8, with 40 Senators and 80 General Assembly members vying for their seats.

But only a few seats will have closely contested races where both the incumbent and the challenger have similar chances of victory, potentially tipping the scales in favor of a Republican-controlled State Legislature.

"There are only a few in the state that are considered competitive, but it's always possible that the voters will surprise us," said John Weingart, the associate director at the Eagleton Institute of Politics.

Some of the closest races exist in Atlantic County (District 2), Bergen County (District 38) and District 14, which is situated in Middlesex and Mercer Counties, Weingart said.

District 17, which contains Franklin Twp., Piscataway Twp. and New Brunswick, is currently held by Democrats — in both Assembly and Senate — but Republican candidates will challenge them.

The 2010 state redistricting did little to change the demographic of voters in this district with only Highland Park joining the bordering District 18, according to thevoterguide.org.

Sen. Bob Smith, D-17, who is also chairman of the Senate Environment and Energy Committee, has held the seat since 1986, and North Brunswick Republican Jason Rickards is the challenger.

In the race for Assembly seats in District 17, Assemblymen Upendra Chivukula and Joseph Egan are defending their seats from challenges by two Republicans, Carlo DiLalla and Robert Mettler.

"I am working hard, along with my running-mate," Chivukula said. "We are going to try to get the word out on the important issues, and make sure we win."

He said job creation, economic development and property taxes are at the forefront of his campaign.

His stance on property taxes has so far been to limit fully funding public schools.

"New Jersey taxpayers have reached a tipping point on taxes," Chivukula said in a 2010 press release. "They can no

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DiLalla said in a survey by thevoterguide.org that he would make sure no money is misspent. Money should be given back to homeowners to help alleviate high property taxes.

Chivukula, on the issue of job creation, said the state should look to solar energy as a potential source of jobs.

In terms of shifting the balance within the state, Weingart said there is little possibility of a complete turnover to Republicans in either house.

“Most people think it is unlikely that [Republicans] will gain enough seats to gain a majority in either house,” he said. “But there is a certain possibility that they pick up one or two seats in each house.”

Weingart said Gov. Chris Christie could still play a major role in the legislative elections, thus helping some Republican candidates take seats from incumbent Democrats.

“Gov. Christie has an ability to raise significant amounts of funds that could help republican legislative candidates,” he said.

The race for Senator in District 14 could be one of those affected by Gov. Christie’s influence.

Sen. Linda Greenstein, D-14, faces a strong challenge from Republican Richard Kanka, the candidate who fought for the passage of Megan’s Law, which protects children against sex offenders, named in honor of his daughter.

Greenstein became senator last year after a special election following the departure of Bill Baroni who resigned to take the position of Deputy Executive Director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, according an article on Trentonian.com.

She beat Sen. Tom Goodwin, the Republican incumbent, that year by a margin of 51 to 49 percent, according to the article.

“My main focus is to make sure we make this an employer-friendly state, which is not right now, because we have taxed all the businesses out of the state,” Kanka said.

He said the state government must make New Jersey more competitive for business to return.

“We must bring businesses back so that when people do graduate from college, they have somewhere to get a job,” he said. “That’s the biggest challenge right now.”

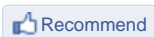

Kanka, a long-time resident of Hamilton, N.J., said his connection to the town would help his campaign.

“The people of Hamilton know what I’ve done in the past and how I work with the legislature, either Republican or Democrat, on the state and federal level,” he said. “There is a trust there.”

Before winning the 2010 election, Greenstein served as an elected member of the Plainsboro Township Committee and as vice president of the Mercer County School Boards Association, according to the New Jersey Legislature website.

Her work includes involvement on committees on Budget/Appropriations as well as Environment/Energy, according to the website.

She was not available at press time.

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